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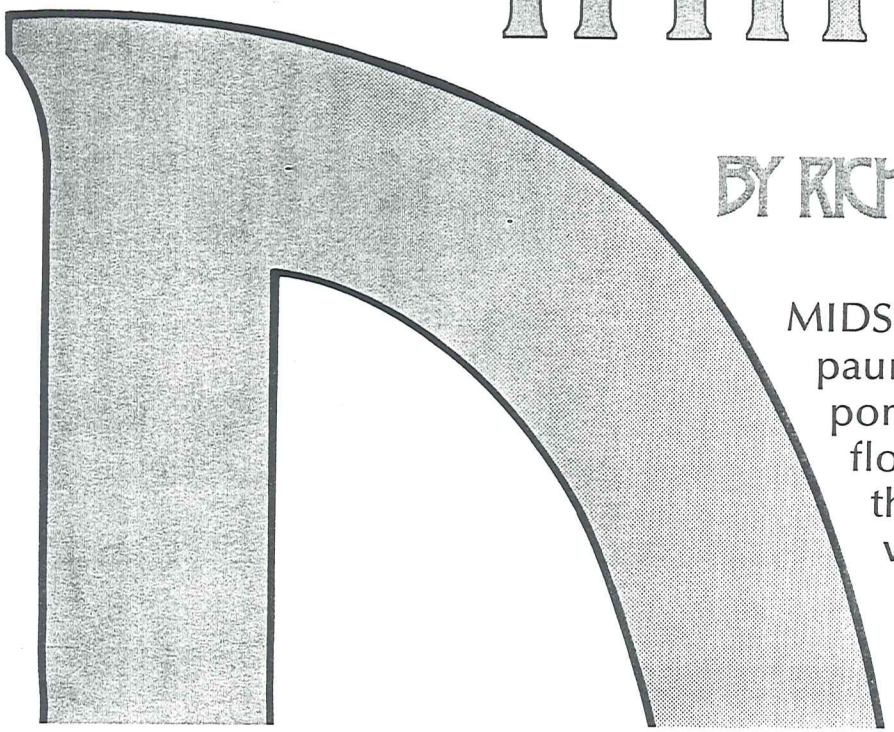
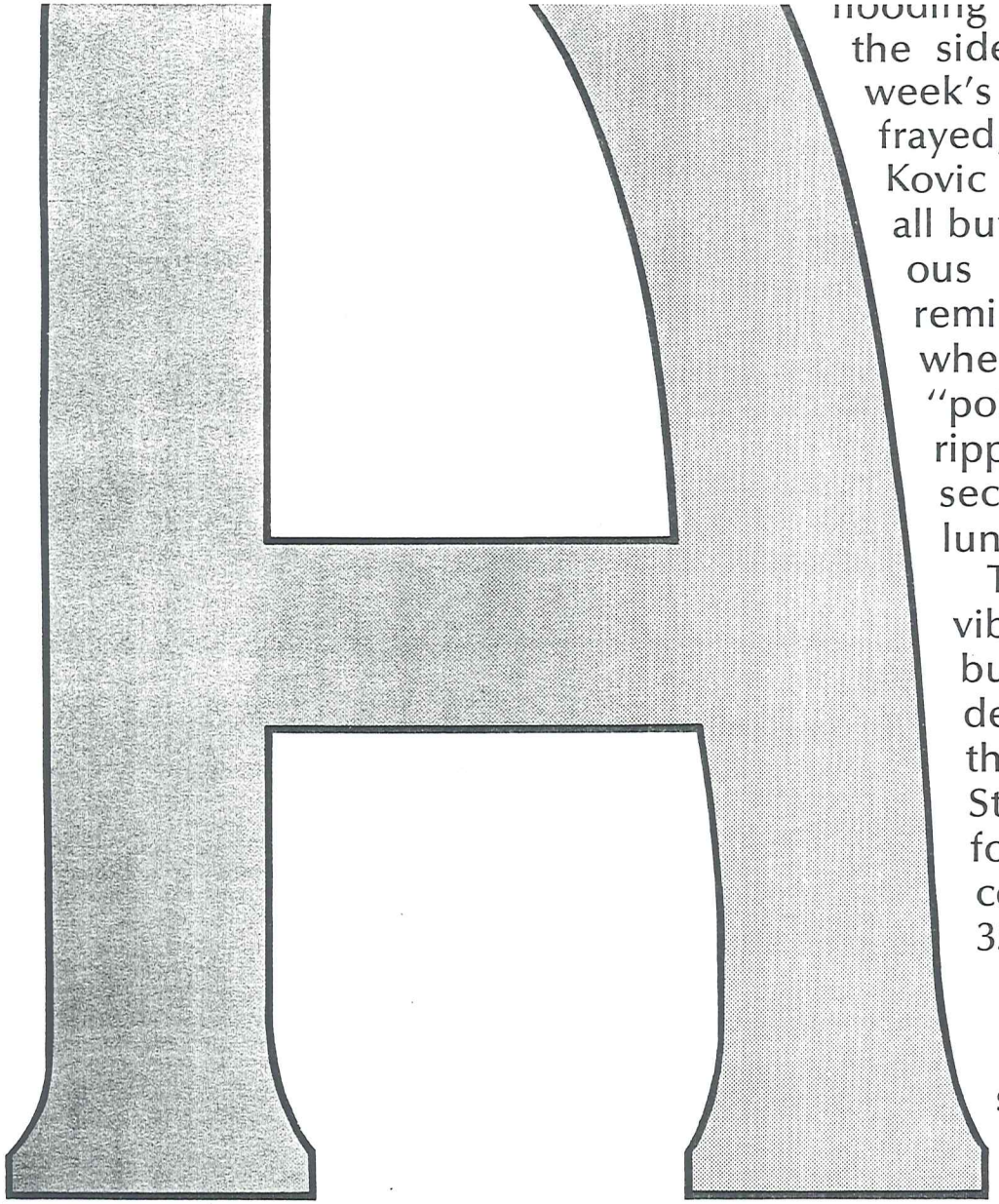
THE LAST PATROL

BY RICHARD BOYLE



MIDST ROW AFTER ROW OF BALDING, paunchy men, freshly manicured pom-pom girls and a thousand white lights flooding the stage, Ron Kovic clutched the side of his wheelchair. With a week's stubble of beard, wearing a frayed, sweat-soaked Marine shirt, Kovic and his two comrades were all but swallowed up in the cavern-



flooding the stage, Ron Kovic clutched the side of his wheelchair. With a week's stubble of beard, wearing a frayed, sweat-soaked Marine shirt, Kovic and his two comrades were all but swallowed up in the cavernous hall. For an instant he was reminded of that day in Vietnam, when he was also walking "point," and the first bullet ripped through his foot. Then a second AK-47 round pierced his lung and cut his spinal cord.

This was not Vietnam, but the vibrations were there—psychic bullets from 5000 Republican delegates. In a few moments the President of the United States would be on platform and Kovic would get the confrontation he had come 3500 miles for.

* * *

Kovic had begun his mission ten days earlier when his contingent of the Last Patrol formed up in Califor-

PHOTOS BY GEORGE BUTLER

nia. He and the others in the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) had been planning for months their march on the Republican convention in Miami. The plan: three convoys of hundreds of vehicles would travel across the United States, converge in Florida, and sweep into Miami. There they would join several thousand others protesting the "coronation of Richard Nixon."

The California convoy would travel for a week through the Deep South. "I'm scared," admitted Jack McCloskey, an ex-Marine medic, as the caravan prepared to leave San Francisco on August 13. "I've been on plenty of convoys in Nam and I think this one will be like that."

The Vets didn't know what kind of reception they would get—a hundred longhairs in tattered military fatigues trucking down the highway in old VW buses, pickup trucks, motorcycles, and even a new Porsche.

The VVAW's last big national action, Dewey Canyon III, was probably the most successful and dramatic in the history of the antiwar movement. For almost three weeks in late April and early May 1971, the sight of hundreds of veterans flinging their medals back at the Pentagon, defying the Supreme Court by bivouacing on the grounds of the Washington Monument, and openly detailing the criminal acts they had committed in Vietnam, captured the attention of the media and stirred the conscience of millions of people.

Six months before, the VVAW had held the Winter Soldier Investigation in Detroit. For the first time, Vets described for a national television audience how they bayoneted babies, disemboweled prisoners, and raped young girls in Vietnam. The filmed version of the event, *Winter Soldier*, remains one of the most powerful indictments of American genocide in Indochina.

More recently, fifteen Vets on trial for seizing the South Vietnamese consulate in San Francisco showed portions of the film to the jury; they were acquitted. Mike Oliver, an articulate VVAW spokesman, said he saw tears come to the eyes of one of the jurors during the showing. And at the victory celebration afterwards, the ex-Navy captain who served as jury foreman told the Vets, "I'm with you boys."

being brought before a federal grand jury, though they weren't told why. Then the government leaked to the press a story of a massive conspiracy by the VVAW to blow up buildings and attack police stations—in effect, start a minor war during the Miami Convention.

The government case, it turned out later, rested on the testimony of a VVAW southern organizer named William Lemmer who is, according to Oliver, "a real psycho—as crazy as they come."

Lemmer was a government agent assigned to infiltrate the VVAW. (Because anyone who claimed to be a veteran and against the war has openly been accepted into the organization, VVAW has long been a ripe target for government infiltration.) The Vets say they have a long taped confession by Lemmer, admitting that the government set up the whole thing to discredit their antiwar campaign. Besides creating further damaging publicity, the indictments were designed to blunt the building momentum of the Last Patrol. (All ten were recently released from jail on their own recognizance by Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas.)

The government tactic was a partial success—the Oregon chapter backed out and other VVAW units were afraid to leave for Miami; but the California, New York, Midwest, and Southern contingents decided to go ahead.

AT MIDNIGHT AUGUST 13, nine vehicles left San Francisco, linking up the next day with the Los Angeles and San Diego convoys to begin the trek across the desert. Traveling with the approximately one hundred vets were some women and non-Vets, including Cathy Leroy, the famous Vietnam War correspondent who had been captured by the Viet Cong during the Tet offensive. The petite French woman was making a movie of the convoy, which she called a "forced march."

The first few days were uneventful—twenty hours of driving each day with the usual breakdowns. But in Texas this changed.

The Texas Rangers met us in El Paso, having already reported to the local press that "a bunch of hippies in jungle fatigues packing machine guns" were heading into their state. There was French accent. Then a Vet security man called our lawyer in Tallahasse and held out the phone:

"Our lawyer wants to discuss some legal matters with you, officer."

The police left.

WE RECEIVED ANOTHER police escort into Tallahassee, all the way up to the front door of a sympathetic local liberal who had planned a party for us. Hamburgers and corn-on-the-cob tasted great after days of peanut butter and sardines. Before we had left California we had searched every vehicle for weapons and dope, figuring the government would like nothing better than a bust on our way to Miami. Now we savored our first tokes in a week.

Throughout the trip, Ron Kovic emerged as the uplifter of spirits. When our morale was low, after one of the innumerable car breakdowns, when we got lost, or when rotten roadside hotdogs left lumps in our stomachs, Kovic would race around in his wheelchair, slapping people on the back, or simply saying, "Man, I feel good." Paralyzed from the waist down, without control of his bladder or bowels, having to pull himself up by his arms to get into his wheelchair, Kovic became the driving force on the convoy.

As we neared Miami, our relations with the Florida police improved. The highway patrolmen addressed each Vet as "sir," and helped with communications with the other convoys strung out along the state.

Miami Beach had never seen anything like it. A hundred cars of all types, with whooping Vets in floppy jungle hats looking like a guerrilla band out of the Dirty Dozen, driving down Collins Avenue with their own escort of biker Vets. Old people waved, younger ones saluted, motorists honked in a gesture of friendship, and several police gave us the peace sign.

"You know," remarked Kovic, "I think lots of people are with us."

And they were. When the city council of Miami Beach decided to bar the Vets and other demonstrators from Flamingo Park for the convention, a delegation of senior citizens went down to the council chambers and demanded

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More recently, fifteen Vets on trial for seizing the South Vietnamese consulate in San Francisco showed portions of the film to the jury; they were acquitted. Mike Oliver, an articulate VVAW spokesman, said he saw tears come to the eyes of one of the jurors during the showing. And at the victory celebration afterwards, the ex-Navy captain who served as jury foreman told the Vets, "I'm with you boys."

THEN, LAST SUMMER, a delegation of Vets met in Paris with representatives from the NLF, the Pathet Lao, and the Khmer Rouge—the first time in the war that soldiers of both sides had gotten together. The very existence of the VVAW has been a constant threat to the government's attempts to deceive the public about the war. These men, many bearing visible emotional and physical scars from the front lines of combat, could not simply be dismissed as "bums, agitators, communists." And the Vets were reaching the Middle Americans. In the Phillips Bar, a local hardhat hangout located near the VVAW office in San Francisco, I saw Archie Bunker types buy the Vets beer and slap them on the back.

In Miami the Vets planned to continue their battle with the American government for the "hearts and minds" of the American people. To blunt the VVAW's increasing effectiveness, the government has fought back by branding the Vets violent criminals, despite the credo of nonviolence which has invariably characterized their statements and actions.

Several weeks before the Last Patrol was to start, Scott Camil, a bushy bearded VVAW organizer in Florida was handed a summons by U.S. marshalls.

Back in 1968 Camil had been a war hero. A Marine in Vietnam, he volunteered for the dangerous position of point man on patrol and volunteered to extend his tour in the combat zone. His hometown newspaper, the *Miami News*, declared: "We give thanks for American patriots like Scott Camil."

Now Camil along with nine others, who would later be called the Tallahassee Ten, were

were some women and non-Vets, including Cathy Leroy, the famous Vietnam War correspondent who had been captured by the Viet Cong during the Tet offensive. The petite French woman was making a movie of the convoy, which she called a "forced march."

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The Texas Rangers met us in El Paso, having already reported to the local press that "a bunch of hippies in jungle fatigues packing machine guns" were heading into their state. There was no confrontation, however, until Austin when Jo Jo, one of the Vets, was singled out during a stop to refuel. An Austin policeman spotted his hunting knife and took him to the police station. The convoy held a meeting on the side of the road and decided not to leave without him.

We sent word to the wire services, and a TV crew went down to the station. Within minutes Jo Jo was out and we were on our way again.

As we got deeper into Texas, something unexpected was happening. Instead of being hassled by the people, everywhere we went we saw peace signs and clenched fist salutes. An old man pressed three dollars into one vet's hand at a truck stop, saying he would be with us if he were younger. In a small town high school girls asked for the Vets' autographs.

But in Louisiana we were met by sixteen state police cars, and near Baton Rouge a sniper shot out a tire of our lead car. When we camped near New Orleans one of the deputies in the police's all-night vigil told us that the Ku Klux Klan was out to get us. In Louisiana, such a statement coming from a cop can be straight from the horse's mouth.

The fifth night found us in a small town in northern Florida surrounded by a dozen police cars. The troopers took all six Chicano Vets aside and started hassling them with ID checks, until Cathy Leroy rushed up, camera in hand, to the head cop and began shooting about two feet from his nose.

"Hey, what're you doin'?" asked the amazed cop, squinting from the glare of a film crew spotlight.

"Taking pictures," smiled Cathy in her lilting

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"You know," remarked Kovic, "I think lots of people are with us."

And they were. When the city council of Miami Beach decided to bar the Vets and other demonstrators from Flamingo Park for the convention, a delegation of senior citizens went down to the council chambers and demanded that they be allowed to camp in Miami Beach as long as they were peaceful. The council did an about-face and turned over the park, which was dubbed "the Land." It was a mighty welcome sight when we arrived—the Vets already there streamed out to greet us; embracing, we exchanged tales of the road and started planning for the days ahead.

THE LAND

Along with the VVAW, there were several other groups who had journeyed to Miami, all sharing Flamingo Park. The Yippies, and an anarchic spin-off group that did not believe Yippies were militant enough, called the Zippies; the People's Coalition for Peace and Justice (PCPJ), a loose amalgam of antiwar activists led by Rennie Davis, which had organized the Miami Convention Coalition (MCC); the Attica Brigade, a group of disciplined young revolutionaries, many of them leftovers from the Mayday actions in the Spring of 1971; and the Progressive Labor Party (PLP), which for the last three years has insisted on calling itself SDS.

[This was a name they had won by default when the Weatherman faction of SDS kicked out the PLP, and then decided it had no use for the name, anyway. The title was most useful to the PLP because most people—and press—do not make such fine distinctions. The PLP was rescued from the brink of oblivion by calling itself SDS, achieving a legitimacy which a decade of ranting about "bosses" versus "workers" and accusing the Viet Cong of "selling out" had never given it.]

Under an elaborate peace treaty among the various groups of demonstrators and Rocky

Pomerance, Miami Beach's portly but suave police chief, the police agreed not to come onto the Land as long as everything ran smoothly.

THE LAND GOVERNMENT was a loose "people's government." The rules: no death drugs, such as speed and smack; no hassling people, especially women. You could generally do anything you wanted just as long as you did not force it on anyone else. Would it work?

The Land got its first test that Sunday when Matt Koehl and his media-freaking American Nazis stormed into the camp and seized the stage in the old baseball diamond. They ranted against Jews, saying, "That's what we're up against." Wearing khaki shirts, black pants, and helmets, the Nazis kept everyone else off the stage.

"Call the Vets," someone shouted. The Nazis were haranguing the crowd when the Vets arrived and a bloody fight began. One Vet was hit in the face with a chair, but the Nazis were driven off the stage. When the crowd then began to attack the Nazis, the Vets protected them by running them out of the park.

The Vets' action was the first in what was to become a stereotyped role as the "cops of the Land."

The VVAW occupied one corner of the park and turned it into a military-type encampment, surrounded by a wire fence with security guards posted at the entrances. There were about a thousand people in the camp, most dressed in some kind of ragged military uniform. In addition to the troops' tents, there was a hospital tent, staffed by medics, an olive drab administration tent, and even a press relations' tent. It looked a little like a firebase.

The Zippies, by contrast, seemed to have no order to their encampment at the other end of the park. The PLP and Attica Brigade areas were more clearly defined. The "Pot People's Party" camped around a big tree, and stayed up most of the night blowing weed. The women's encampment barred men.

The Miami Convention Coalition (MCC) leaders did not camp on the Land at all, but [illegible] It appeared that

onto the grounds of the high school. The Guardsmen slammed shut the gate and pulled back inside the school as the Vets swarmed over the lawn and up to the gate and sides of the barricaded building. Down the street, blocks of highway patrol cars waited, each with four men inside. The Vets sat down and Ron Kovic began to speak into the loudspeaker.

The guardsmen, in full riot gear, peered out from behind shut windows on the top floor of the high school and listened as Kovic spoke. He called them his brothers, and told them that he was once for Goldwater, but that the war had turned his head around.

"They made me kill, they took three-quarters of my body...but they didn't take my mind. We have free wills. Join us!" he pleaded.

He turned around in his wheelchair and looked up at the guardsmen, the row of medals on his Marine Corps shirt glistening. "They forced me to fight and give my legs for a war we didn't want. If I ever have to fight again, it will not be against the people, but with the people—and this time it will be a people's army!"

One of the Guardsmen in the window gave a clenched fist salute. The lifers quickly shut the blinds and moved them back.

TUESDAY

IN THE MORNING a PLP contingent marched on the Fountainebleau Hotel, the massive edifice housing Republican aristocracy. On the way the demonstrators broke some windows on the main street. I went down after they passed and watched a group of elderly people looking at the broken windows of the street's burlesque house.

"They shouldn't have done that," said one woman. "Why did they do it?" After this, the mood of the Miami Beach citizenry changed; although not yet hostile, it was not as friendly to the demonstrators. People still brought lemonade to the park and flashed peace signs, but the atmosphere was noticeably more tense.

In the afternoon, the Vets decided that they too would march on the Fountainebleau, only their march was to be different from that of

The Vets applauded each speaker, including national coordinator Barry Romo, who said: "We want an end of the Vietnam war, not a changing of the color of the skins of those who are dying." But it was Kovic, the twenty-six-year-old ex-Marine sergeant, winner of the bronze star, who brought them to their feet, cheering and stomping.

"We're tired of a government that has lied to us, that sent us off to a war and forgot about us when we came home." Looking up at the gaudy white and turquoise facade of the hotel, he yelled out: "You have lied to us too long, you have burned too many babies, but you haven't taken our minds." Some Vets were crying openly.

A hard rain began to fall and the Republican delegates who had been watching from behind police lines scurried for shelter. The police, their faces hard, clubs in their hands, stood rigid, three deep.

Kovic, beads of rain streaming down his face, looked up at the delegates peering out from behind their windows.

"That's okay," he yelled. "We don't mind the rain." He shouted that the Vets had come from all over the nation, sleeping in the rain and on the ground.

"We like to sleep on the ground because the Land belongs to the people!" The Vets jumped to their feet, shouting in approval. Spirit was high.

There was a quick conference with McCloskey and a scenario worked out. McCloskey would ask the police if a delegation of three Vets, three men who had given their legs for Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, could pass through the police lines into the lobby of the hotel. McCloskey agreed to go with them. Inside the three would demand that their President see them and listen to them.

Many of the Vets dug the script: it was like check in a chess game. The one thousand would wait outside, as one put it, "until hell freezes over," while the three point men waited inside for Nixon. Nixon, of course, would not want to confront three angry Vets on television—that would upset his neatly worked out script of harmony and happiness, well orchestrated by an army of PR men. But he wouldn't like to throw three disabled Vets in jail—that would not look good either.

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The Miami Convention Coalition (MCC) leaders did not camp on the Land at all, but stayed in a hotel on the beach. It appeared that the MCC was an army of all generals and no privates. There were also about a thousand independents who belonged to no organized group. In addition, there were assorted Jesus freaks, gay activists, and others.

Against this motley conglomeration of about 4,000 persons, the government had massed an army of 8,000, which included the 250-man Miami Beach police force, backed up by several thousand Dade County sheriff deputies, Florida Highway Patrolmen, and other state employees such as wardens from the Fish and Game Department. There were also 500 secret service agents, a large contingent of the National Guard, plus a unit of Marines and thousands of crack paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne Division.

"Man, I only hope they bring in the 82nd," said a Vet with a paratrooper tattoo. Many of the Vets were either ex-paratroopers or Marines, and they were convinced that if it came down to it, the airborne troops would refuse to turn their guns on a brother paratrooper. But we got word that the airborne units were made up of lifers, with no one below the rank of sergeant. "Still," said one ex-paratrooper, "I don't care, I don't think they would shoot the Vets."

MONDAY

The three thousand National Guardsmen were quartered in Miami Beach High School, a few blocks from the convention site. It would be here that the Vets would make their first confrontation. If they could win over the Guardsmen it would be an important victory.

Kovic and two other disabled Vets led the march, followed by about a thousand others. They marched past the convention center and after they passed and watched a group of elderly people looking at the broken windows of the street's burlesque house.

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In the afternoon, the Vets decided that they too would march on the Fountainebleau, only their march was to be different from that of the PLP. They would walk in silence, carrying no flags, in military formation, four abreast.

While the Vets' march was nearing the convention, police were busting over 200 Zips and PLPers at the main gate. According to witnesses, the demonstrators had torn down bunting at one hotel on the strip and smacked a Republican alternate, Dr. Harold Barton, in the mouth. When the Vets were about a block from the Zips, the Zips let out a loud cheer, but the Vets veered right, marching away from the melee. I went ahead and saw the police herding people into yellow vans. The Zips, some naked, sang: "We all live in a yellow submarine." The cops took a polaroid shot of each demonstrator. Innocent bystanders, including a bewildered young Republican girl, were also swept up by the police.

It's not clear whether the Vets knew about the busts. I saw the VVAW advance men watching the arrests, but the main body of Vets seemed to know nothing about them.

The Vets marched on to the Fountainebleu and were met by several hundred police armed with guns and clubs. The Vets sat down and listened to speeches. Rep. Pete McCloskey came out to meet with the Vets. McCloskey was at that time waging a losing fight to get his name in nomination. He had by law one delegate vote, so he was trying to take the issue of the war before the convention and the national television audience.

McCloskey talked with about a dozen Vets, and several asked if he would address the entire VVAW delegation. He agreed, but Vet leader Al Hubbard said no. "If he wants to talk to us let him come out to our camp." Hubbard's opposition squelched the plan for McCloskey to speak.

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McCloskey haggled with the police until they finally agreed. But then Hubbard and Romo and others in the VVAW national leadership decided they were against the idea. Romo grabbed the loudspeaker, saying, "We'll put it to a vote." But he put it in a way to make sure it would be turned down: "The police agreed to let three Vets go in, but do you want three to go in or all of us to go in?" Of course the vote was against the three going inside. Next, Romo announced that "we're going back to camp."

AT FIRST NOBODY moved, then one Vet shouted, "stay!" And then another and another. Romo and Hubbard stood up and said again that it was time to leave. This time the Vets started chanting, "Vote! Vote! Vote!"

But it was too late. Some Vets got up to go, while others stayed seated. There was a lot of arguing and general confusion. Many Vets started shuffling back toward camp in disarray, while others milled around in front of the hotel. All the while the VVAW leadership was calling into the bullhorns to move out. After about half the Vets were gone, the three disabled men went into the hotel anyway to deliver a letter to Nixon, although it was too late for the action that was originally planned.

The events at the Fountainebleu proved to be the high point of the Last Patrol, the crest of the wave. After Tuesday afternoon, the momentum was gone.

On the way back the Vets whistled a song that was to become their theme, "When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again." Many were bit-

ter, feeling betrayed by their own leaders. "They should have put it to a vote, about staying," one said. "That wasn't right, man."

TUESDAY NIGHT

As the Vets marched back toward their camp, they met another march coming from Flamingo Park—the Street Without Joy procession. The French called a bloody coastal strip of highway in Vietnam where they lost so many men the "street without joy," and the MCC decided to line the entrance to the convention with demonstrations to shame the delegates coming to the Tuesday evening session.

It was a somber march of silent, white-faced men and women in Vietnamese garb, some holding bloodied, disemboweled dolls. It looked like the procession of guilt-ridden religious zealots in Bergman's film, *The Seventh Seal*.

When the two marches met, about three-quarters of the Vets, tired and somewhat dispirited, continued on back to the camp. But Kovic and 300 others decided to join the Street Without Joy procession, which the MCC leaders promised would be nonviolent.

The Vets formed up and marched, also in silence. When they got to the convention hall, they were assigned gate one, to the left of the main entrance. The MCC planned to maintain a silent vigil around the hall, but after an hour or so all order broke down.

At gate two, demonstrators began to punch, kick, and spit on the delegates trying to make their way through the mob, which now numbered several thousand. The convention hall, surrounded by a high fence and manned by a phalanx of police, was like a prison in the no-man's land of Miami Beach. Outside the perimeter there was no law or order. As the attacks on delegates at gate two increased, the police came charging out, swinging clubs and shooting streams of foul liquid out of their mace cannisters.

At the Vets' gate—gate one—the crowd had grown to over a thousand, with a large number of Zippies and PLP members as well as a troop of the Attica brigade. Some tried to hit the frantic delegates, while others spit or threw water. As the situation was deteriorating, Kovic decided to take charge.

Under his direction, the Vets formed a line, frontations—and it was just as terrifying.

Things were getting worse, and Kovic wheeled over to the police lines where a tall policeman with a major's oakleaf in his lapel was standing. "I don't know how much longer we can hold out," said Kovic. He asked for a few plainsclothesmen to help hold the line but the policeman said that it was against orders.

SO IT WAS one of the strangest demstration scenes imaginable: the Vets, some of whom (including Kovic) had gone to jail in other demonstrations, were fighting this time to save Nixon's delegates; and the police were standing by doing nothing.

Something was going to happen soon—we all knew it—there would be blood spilled. Then it happened. A huge black Cadillac raced through the crowd.

"Hey motherfucker, slow down!" someone shouted, but the driver stepped on the gas. The crowd began to beat on the sides of the car as it sped up. Then there was a dull thump and a woman screamed.

Lying motionless on the ground, blood oozing out of his still body, was a figure in combat fatigues.

When I saw the blood, my mind flashed back to Vietnam. Like an acid trip, visions of dead Marines in Arizona territory, charred infants at Ben Het, decomposing North Vietnamese, flies buzzing about their bodies...it all came back in staccato bursts. I felt like puking but the vomit wouldn't come.

The sight of the Vet, his face bloodied, his worn uniform turning red, shocked the crowd. While several Vet medics hovered over the body of their wounded comrade, other Vets pushed back the crowd. The TV cameramen, like vultures smelling the scent of rotting carrion, rushed over. "Get the fuck out of here," snarled one enraged Vet, pushing back a cameraman.

Some of the newsmen helped push back the crowd; then Zips, Yips, PLP, and Attica Brigade members who just moments before were trying to get at the delegates, joined the Vet lines and linked arms.

"The ambulance is coming, clear the way."

state would come up with its own scenario, take the plan to the twenty-six-man ruling body, hash it out, and then present the best plan to the full membership for a vote. In theory it sounded good, but in practice it didn't work.

California voted to hold a silent candlelight march to the convention. New York haggled for hours, unable to decide on any plan. Michigan wanted to join the Zips in "mobile actions," blocking streets and then running when the police attacked.

Outside the Vets' camp, other groups were also trying to decide on a course of action. The MCC wanted a massive show of civil disobedience, and the Zips wanted to trash. Both groups wanted the Vets to join them.

Rennie Davis and Dave Dellinger, leaders of the MCC, came over to the Vets' encampment to lobby for civil disobedience. Dellinger, a soft-spoken, dedicated man who served in prison for his pacifist beliefs during World War II, met with Vet leaders and promised to go back to the Zippie side of the Land and argue for nonviolence. The Vets said they were afraid that the PLP and the Zips wanted to use them as a shield, inciting the police to attack, which would lead to a clash between the police and the Vets.

Meanwhile, the Zips were holding a chaotic rally on the baseball diamond. A long line was waiting to use the loudspeaker. One speaker urged ripping out cars' wiring systems and slashing tires. Others simply rambled. Finally Dellinger got his chance and told the crowd that trashing was a "male machismo trip" and counter-productive. He was booed. The mood was for trashing and the Vets listening reported that back to the VVAW camp.

The feeling among the Vets was that trashing would simply turn the people of Miami Beach, who had thus far been friendly, against them.

The hours passed. Dellinger and Davis did not live on the Land but at a beach hotel, and many in the park resented that. The gulf between the MCC and the Zips was widening.

Finally at two o'clock, after five hours of preliminaries, the Vets' general meeting got under way, and there was still no plan of action. The leadership, it appeared, wanted to leave Miami and head for Gainesville where six of the TallahasseeTen members were being arraigned the

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Under his direction, the Vets formed a line, linking arms so the delegates could get through to the hall. Kovic then laid down ground rules for gate one: you could say anything you wanted to a delegate but you could not touch him.

THE MOB STRAINED against the Vets' lines each time a delegate tried to get through. At first the delegates, many dressed in dapper blazers or long evening gowns tried to look cool, but after the first punch or wad of zippie spit they lost all composure. There was terror in their faces. Some were old women, others looked liked scared shopkeepers from the Midwest—they were simply frightened human beings.

Kovic raced up and down the thin line of 300 Vets in his wheelchair, exhorting them to "hold the line." Some of the demonstrators joined the human chain. Kovic's motives were not entirely humanitarian; he hated what the delegates stood for as much as the most enraged Zippie. But if the mob hurt a delegate it would be a political victory for Nixon, especially if it happened at the Vets' gate. It would also give the police an excuse to come charging out from behind their barricades. Since the Vets would fight back, it could easily lead to a bad scene.

There were running street battles at all the other gates so the only gate open to the delegates was the one held by the Vets. The crowd continued to grow and press against the thin line. The hatred and frustration of the Zips showed on their faces—a look I had seen before in the deep South during the freedom rides and in Ulster during Protestant-Catholic conbody of their wounded comrade, other Vets pushed back the crowd. The TV cameramen, like vultures smelling the scent of rotting carrion, rushed over. "Get the fuck out of here," snarled one enraged Vet, pushing back a cameraman.

Some of the newsmen helped push back the crowd; then Zips, Yips, PLP, and Attica Brigade members who just moments before were trying to get at the delegates, joined the Vet lines and linked arms.

"The ambulance is coming, clear the way." Protesters and delegates alike moved aside to let the vehicle through. Later we found out that the injured Vet would be okay.

The entire mood at gate one changed. We had all seen where the violence was leading and nobody wanted any part of it. As the last delegate worked his way into the hall, the exhausted Vets headed back to camp.

It was a bad night for all of us.

When we got back to camp the regional coordinators were holding a meeting and planning to censure Kovic for "playing cop" at gate one. But at a meeting of all the Vets, the majority disagreed with the censorship motion and it was dropped.

That night, while I was sleeping on the ground, I was startled by a strange sound. On the street outside the park, bus after bus was passing noisily. We could hear chanting and stomping inside the buses. We could not hear what they were chanting, but it sounded like an ancient tribal ritual. We found out later that they were the Dade County sheriff deputies, psyching themselves up for Nixon's acceptance speech the next day.

WEDNESDAY

The VVAW encampment was like a small convention. Each state had its own section and lobbied for its own plan of action. There was a revolt of the members brewing, brought on by the leadership's arbitrary decision to leave the Fountainebleu without putting the matter to a vote. The national leadership began to disintegrate but there was nothing to fill the void.

Before, all tactical decisions had been left to the twenty-six regional coordinators and the national leaders. Now it was decided that each who had thus far been friendly, against them.

The hours passed. Dellinger and Davis did not live on the Land but at a beach hotel, and many in the park resented that. The gulf between the MCC and the Zips was widening.

Finally at two o'clock, after five hours of preliminaries, the Vets' general meeting got under way, and there was still no plan of action. The leadership, it appeared, wanted to leave Miami and head for Gainesville where six of the TallahasseeTen members were being arraigned the next morning.

KOVIC, HOWEVER, ARGUED against leaving, saying that the Gainesville arraignment was a carefully timed move by the government to get the Vets out of Miami during Nixon's acceptance speech. The Vets voted overwhelmingly to stay, but they still could not decide on a particular course of action. As the hours passed, speaker after speaker urged one plan or another but none won general acceptance. The Florida delegation walked out, heading for Gainesville by itself; then Michigan stormed out to join the Zippies in their "mobile tactics."

On the other side of the Land, the Zips were gathering sticks, and Boston's Sacco-Vanzetti brigade, shouting "Sacco-Vanzetti," was marching off to war, red banners flying.

Gradually most of the Vets, disgusted with the discord at the meeting, wandered off. Some were even heading home. The VVAW was hopelessly split and impotent.

Reports from the convention center were ominous. "It's weird man," said one Vet. "I saw a whole bunch of cops inside pounding their clubs on the pavement. They all started shouting 'just wait, we're gonna get the fuckin' queers' and stuff like that."

Another Vet said he tried to talk with a cop, but was warned, "I don't care what you do, but if you come over this fence you're gonna get this." He was thumping his club against his palm.

Obviously the earlier rapport with the police had broken down after the violence the night before. None of the [*Continued on Page 62* .]

The Last Patrol

[*Continued from Page 56* .] Vets wanted a repeat of gate one, being sandwiched between the Zips and the cops, having to govern an ungovernable situation . . . So it was finally decided, after ten hours of talking, that each Vet would have to decide his own action.

McCloskey had managed to get three passes the night before for the disabled Vets. But the Republicans had shunted them off to the upper reaches of the balcony where they would not be seen. Now, Kovic decided he would try to get into the convention itself, so I pushed him down to the convention center. Along the way, old people watering the lawns or sitting on their porches waved to us.

As we neared the convention, we saw thousands of demonstrators running toward us. Some were carrying bleeding friends and others were gagging from the gas. When the convention center came into view we could see swirling clouds of gas and we could hear the popping of gas grenades. A girl was sitting on the curb gagging and crying and a young man was handing out wads of wet tissue paper, pleading, "Don't touch your eyes."

We kept heading for the hall. "You better not go there, they're coming," cried a youth running toward us, his face contorted with fear. There was no form or order to the demonstration, just masses of people fleeing from the police who continued to fire tear gas canisters at them.

Many of the Vets were acting as medics. Old people were streaming out of their hotels, choking and coughing. My eyes were beginning to burn and my throat felt like sandpaper; Kovic too was gagging, but we decided to keep going.

We finally reached the police lines behind the fence at the main gate. Kovic called out, holding up his pass to the convention, but none of the police, looking like motionless robots in their gas masks, would help him. "Please, I have a pass, can I get in?"

No one moved. We waited. Then a big cop came over to the gate, looked at Kovic, and said, "We'll get you in." We recognized him from the night before—he was the cop with the major's oakleaf who had seen Kovic trying to protect the delegates going in gate one. A sympathetic newsman offered to push Kovic's wheelchair.

I didn't know whether he would actually get in, and if he did, where he would be able to go.

The police were forming up to charge again and I joined the retreat. We were herded around the streets like cattle. "It's a trap," someone shouted, as more police appeared from another direction. Small groups of protesters escaped in every direction.

Up on Collins Avenue Zippies were knocking over garbage cans and blocking traffic, pounding on the hoods of cars and shouting. Earlier in the evening, according to witnesses, they had stopped a bus, slashed the tires, and tried to put a burning American flag in the gas tank.

The police, too, were going berserk, cornering isolated groups of demonstrators and beating anyone they could catch.

As the Zippies blocked traffic, a crowd of old people, tourists and residents, gathered to watch. When a Zippie jumped on a car full of children, one bystander shouted for him to stop. A Zippie girl then charged at the bystander, yelling, "Go fuck yourself!"

A line of police came marching up, two deep. The Zips fled, only to run right into another column of cops coming from the other direction. They were trapped and some frantically escaped into the big hotels along the strip. A panic-stricken old woman tried to run past police lines, but she was held back by a cop holding up his club. The police halted for a moment, then marched forward, trapping everying in their circle, young and old, innocent and guilty. No one was allowed out.

"I have to go home," the old woman pleaded. The cops said nothing, but just held their clubs vertically in both hands.

I walked back to the park. There was a pall of gas in the air and people were milling about in confusion. By now the good vibes of the previous days were completely gone. The experiment of the Land was finished.

The California convoy met about a mile from the park for its final trek to Gainesville. Although we drove all night we got to Gainesville too late for the arraignment. The government was and is now claiming that the Vets were planning to overthrow Nixon with "wrist rockets," Kafkaesque terminology for sling shots. If it were not for the Vets waiting to be tried, it would be funny: the VVAW, armed with slingshots, conquering the mightiest military machine of all time.

We regrouped at a campsite in a wooded area outside of town. It was raining hard but nobody seemed to notice. I had always wondered what it was like to be in retreat, like Washington at Valley Forge—to be defeated in battle and down in spirit. There were about 400 Vets left—the battered remnants of the Last Patrol.

No one spoke most of the day. But every once in awhile someone would ask, "What happened?" The answer was always the same: "I don't know."

Late in the afternoon someone started playing the harmonica...'When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again, Hoorah, Hoorah."

I found Ron Kovic and listened as he told what happened the last night in the convention hall. Kovic and his two comrades in wheel chairs had gotten into the convention and, by sheer determination, made their way right up to the front.

Kovic waited for Nixon to begin his speech. Then he shouted out with everything he had, "Stop the war!" Nixon paused for a moment, and again the three of them shouted, "Stop the war!"

They held up signs, and each time Nixon paused, they shouted, "Stop the war!" Hoards of newsmen and secret service agents surrounded them. Some delegates booed; others stood up and clapped for the President, trying to keep the press from the three Vets.

Like a voice in the wilderness Kovic stretched as far as he could in his wheelchair, held up a sign, and called out, "Stop the war!" Then a delegate ripped the sign from his hands as police and agents quickly pushed the three of them out of the hall. Walter Cronkite peered down from his perch looking through binoculars, but not one hint of what was going on ever got on television. The American people never knew. It wasn't in the Nixon script—the whole thing was too messy, too unpleasant—it didn't fit into the Vets-For-Nixon drive or the well-planned, wholesome youth rallies. Ron Kovic had been useful when Nixon needed cannon fodder, but now he was just in the way, so he threw him out.

With the Vets out of the hall, the only hitch in the "coronation" was gone. The renomination of Richard Nixon proceeded orderly, according to schedule and without any mention of the brutal war in Indochina.△